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ABSTRACT

The experience of schooling in America is recalled through a memory-sharing essay and an album of photographs. The intent of the article is to prompt readers to remember their personal schooling experiences and relate them to the larger framework of national memories. The essay, focusing on schools at the turn of the 20th century, discusses urban-rural educational differences, field trips, social mobility, classroom activities, assemblies, hot lunch programs, and the relationship of schools to the American dream. The bulk of the album consists of 35 photographs culled from the collections of the Library of Congress and the Farm Security Administration. The photographs span the period 1890-1943 and picture life in numerous types of schools--modern city schools, rural one-room schools, night schools for working boys, cooking schools for Negro girls, and an Indian school. Teachers and students are shown performing many types of classroom activities, conducting field trips, planting gardens, studying music, playing basketball, waiting for the school bus, eating hot lunches, and pledging allegiance to the flag. (Author/DB)

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# Schools of the Past: A Treasury of Photographs

O. L. Davis, Jr.

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# SCHOOLS OF THE PAST: A TREASURY OF PHOTOGRAPHS

By O. L. Davis, Jr.

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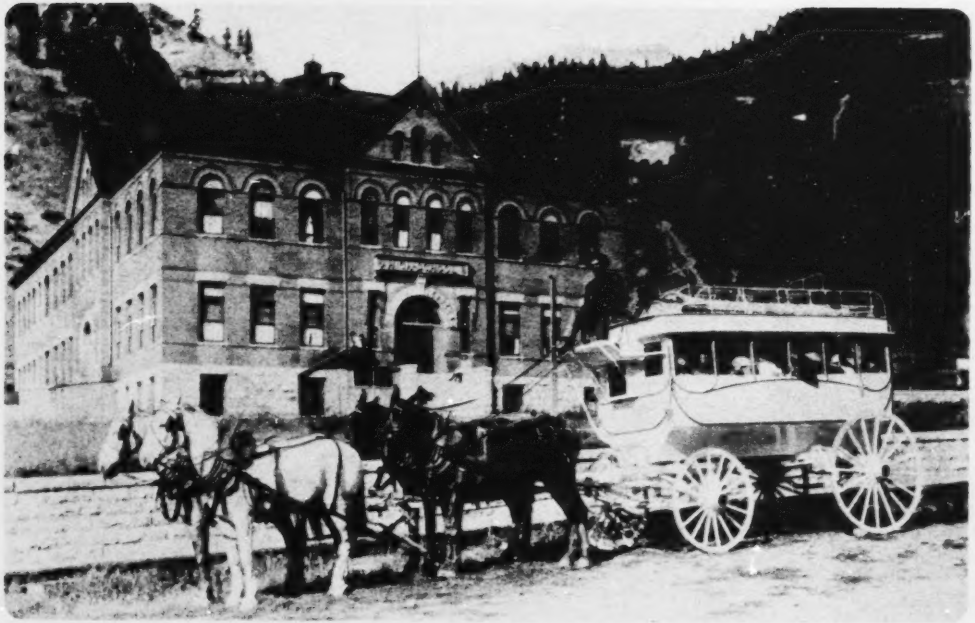

*Horsedrawn stagecoach school bus, Telluride High School, district unknown, circa 1910.*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special appreciation is extended to Professor Jack R. Frymier, The Ohio State University, for suggesting this album as a Phi Delta Kappa fastback. His encouragement and assistance has sustained the enterprise from the beginning. Also meriting acknowledgment are Professors Gerald A. Ponder and Walter Doyle, North Texas State University, with whom I shared the joy of discovering the fabulous photographs in the Library of Congress. Planning and selecting photographs and writing were aided in so many ways by my wife Joan, our eager tenth-grader, Matthew, and our family's new teacher, son Luke. Without question, my deep thanks go to Don Robinson and his Phi Delta Kappa staff colleagues for confidence and for patience exceeding understanding. In particular, my gratitude to Phi Delta Kappa for its ready support of this project to bring to common view these wonderful photographic treasures of our national experience in schools.

## A SHARING OF MEMORIES

I must have been five years old and remember that my family was walking to high school commencement. A May evening, I know now; then, it was one of the biggest days of the year. Not like Christmas. Maybe it was bigger. It certainly was more formal. At Commencement (what a mouthful for a kindergartner), my father would award diplomas to the graduates. What bigger event than graduation from high school?

That night, I walked alongside Dad. Mother trailed us with my toddling twin brother and sister. I must have been talking about Commencement. In any event, Dad made me a mighty promise. "When you graduate, son, your mother and I will give you a watch."

I must have thought about that promise a thousand times. Certainly, Dad and I talked about my graduation watch for each of the next dozen commencements.

The promise was kept. And I still reckon time by school years and commencements.

Memories are so very personal. I know I recall events and persons in ways others can never know. And they probably would not want my images, for mine would displace their own. When we share our memories, however, we add rather than substitute.

This album is a sharing of memories.

My memories come from my time, my places. They are not meant to be general. They are not meant to relate to everyone's experiences of schooling. These memories may be phrased out of undyed hyperbole, or bleached description. For the most part,

they are happy, for most memories slough their bitter husks, their harsh and barbed edges.

This sharing is set within a larger memory. For this is Bicentennial year. A time to remember who we are as a people. A time to know ourselves not as plastic people, but full-dimensioned. The Bicentennial celebration writ large is our personal recognitions writ deeply. And memories help. Of Delaware's delegate riding desperate through the night to Philadelphia so that his vote would make the Declaration of Independence unanimously endorsed by the Congress of the thirteen colonies. Of General McCauliff's epic reply to the Nazi commander that he surrender his encircled airborne troopers, "Nuts." And millions more memories.

Two centuries of national independence is just eight generations. Most of us Americans cannot remember our personal history in this land that long, even if we have the memories in our family. We Americans are still newcomers in a new land. We need to share memories. This Bicentennial seems to underscore most our political heritages, the warp and woof of institutions and ideas that helped set us independent and on course and have helped us maintain our freedom and after strayings, brought us back to our heading. Such emphasis is not merely appropriate; it is correct.

During the years of our independence, we Americans have lived full lives if not at all times fully. Bicentennial provides an occasion to grasp for the richness and variety of that living. Our loves. Our rapacity. Our indulgence. Our arrogance. Our humility. Our railroads, factories, farms; our shops, churches, seaports. And our schools.

This sharing is about schools, particularly.

And a major portion is a special collection of photographs about life in schools.

All these photographs were selected for this album from the photographic collection of the Library of Congress.

Just prior to the turn into the twentieth century, Frances Benjamin Johnson took her camera into schools, particularly the District of Columbia public schools and Carlisle Indian School, and emerged with a magnificent set of images. Obviously posed but, nevertheless, employing her equipment to its limits, Miss Johnson's photographs enable us to know the spartan severity

of Carlisle and the rich fullness of D.C. schools. The quaintness of clothing styles detract little from the children and events portrayed.

The second large group of photographs were taken from the extensive Farm Security Administration collection. During the 1930s, a perceptive federal administrator decided to document pictorially the changing American life, particularly but not limited to farm folk. Roy Emerson Stryker directed this project. After consultation with many, including *Middletown's* Robert Lynd, Stryker hired some of the most gifted figures in American photography (and thereby enabled them both to work and, probably, to survive the depression better). Note the credits. John Vachon. Gordon Parks. Carl Mydans. Walker Evans. Ben Shahn. Arthur Rothstein. Dorothea Lange. And more. Only a few of this multitude of exceptional photographs have been published. And even fewer of the photographs of children and youth in schools. Those included in this album enable us to see freshly the everydays of growing up and going to school in the depression indented days of the '30s, a time that pockmarked its generation for life.

Until now, almost every one of these photographs has been stored in cabinets and on shelves. They have been available but not accessible except to a few. Now, these views of life in school are open to millions of Americans. What exhilaration to encounter real people in times only dimly known! or never known at all!

So, look slowly through the album. Gaze deeply. May your memories be prompted in this sharing.

Mother went to Live Oak school. The eldest of the brood, she rehearsed the day's lessons with her younger sisters and brother as they trudged over two mountains and one creek to their school. Mainly reading, penmanship, spelling, arithmetic. One year, Granddad sold a bale of cotton to pay for books. Texts were not so expensive; cotton was very cheap.

I remember the Live Oak school building, too. Thirty years later, the old building was moved to Lometa when seven rural districts were consolidated and the new school building was being constructed by the PWA. It had two rooms and a partition long since squeaked into immobility. My classmates and I huddled around a potbellied stove to get warm that winter, at least warm on one side and for a short time.

In those turn of twentieth century days, in such rural schools,

geography and history were not ordinary school subjects. Neither was art or music or manual training. Those were subjects for city schools. Geography was the county seat, School Creek, Bald Mountain and Onion Top, Long Cove and McAnelly's Bend. It was also the river Jordan, Mt. Sinai, Egypt, and Bethlehem. History was the account of Grandpa Adams' travels from upstate New York to Chicago to the California gold fields to rocky acres, the first in San Saba county to be hemmed by "bob-wire."

History was the reminiscences of a family who floated a covered wagon North across the swollen Red River into Indian Territory in search of a larger stake and the trip back after the father decided that with such wild and rough neighbors the Territory was no place to bring up girls. It was the story of shepherds watching their flocks by night. It was the deliberate forgetting of the times when occupying cavalry troops regularly visited the county and the eruption of dormant stories about losing and winning in a long gray war, mostly about losing.

Schools in that rural America were not concerned at all about occupational studies. Children went to school when they were not required to work in the fields. And they learned to plow straight furrows, to butcher hogs, to sew straight and dainty seams, to make butter, to dig a well, to repair fences—all as they worked alongside their parents. They expected to live out their lives much like their parents.

But most did not.

Railroads, the symbol of the industrial revolution, cut across the land. For a long time, they carried the abundance of harvests and a trickle of manufactured goods in return. Later, they carried the people . . . to towns and cities.

Schools in the first part of this century served many as a kind of underground railway from one life-style to another. For many they were a ticket from rural to urban, if not metropolitan, life.

Mother recalls that she grew bone weary of picking cotton each fall. Liking school and an eager student, she persisted to become a teacher. Ten years of summer school at Normal, then State Teachers College brought a degree. By then, she had ten years teaching experience and Dad. They met at college one summer. He was an ex-GI of the War to End All Wars, a strapping fellow off an east Texas piney woods farm, without cash or credit when he arrived at Denton. He milked cows to pay his expenses

and he ate little. Manual training was one of his teaching fields; it symbolized the something better in life that he knew must exist.

Long looks at the Johnson photographs show schools unlike most I've heard about from family and friends. Those District of Columbia schools were city schools. The buildings were well lighted and spacious. And the children wore shoes. I do recall statistics of enrollment and attendance in city schools of the era. Most children did not attend. Work in factories and mines and mills was the fare for more children than physiology, rhetoric, and drawing, much less the three Rs. White pupils mainly, if not absolutely, went to school in districts all across the land. Those D.C. schools appear to represent a slice of the status of the children's parents in the federal district and their slow initiation into professional life. But that comment is already too harsh.

Look for what the D.C. pupils were doing. Notice what they examined, the materials they used, how they were grouped, and the like. And remember. These photographs were taken *before* Kilpatrick's Project Method, IQ testing, Rice's expose of the spelling grind, the Cardinal Principles, and the Progressive Education Association. Note how *modern* and *progressive* life in school appears to have been.

And modern it was.

Object Teaching is so very evident. Field trips took children to the canal, the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, and the zoo. Pupils used several media (note the mapping) to gain concepts of spatial relationships. And mathematics was both practical (measuring) and remote. The simulated office complete with booths and cages. The detailed drawings in art class and the carefully drafted penmanship. I am everytime amazed at today's modernity leaping out of the Johnson photographs. And I wonder how many city children of today (for example, those in D.C., San Francisco, New Orleans, and Austin) really have as abundant a life in school.

Certainly the richness of the D.C. schools sets apart pupils there from the experience known by the vast majority of American school children of the day. Few books. Even fewer other instructional materials. Abbreviated school terms. Haphazard attendance. Rude structures, barely equipped. Teachers who had passed county examination after eighth grade or had completed

short normal courses or had somehow gained a job. And the real life big boys who came to school to terrorize the new teacher as a respite from laying in crops, some of whom were tamed and learned to read and returned every time inclement weather or a tolerant father permitted.

Schools in rural areas and in cities, even dead tradition and verbalism, have served up hope and wisdom and glimpses of opportunity. Poor teachers, colorless structures, and a saddle-bag curriculum have, even so, ennobled and enabled Abraham Lincolns, George Washington Carvers, Lyndon Johnsons, and millions more. And how much more now with more children and youth in school, with better teachers, with improved curricula, and with better materials? An answer will come, but not now. We're too close to our time. Perhaps four generations hence, at our tricentennial.

Rudolph Flesch would heat up the phonics fuss after World War II. Between world wars, however, vocabulary studies and the measurement movement transformed reading, perhaps the most dramatic curriculum change in American history. McGuffey's national morals gave way to Dick and Jane and their carefully graded vocabularies, sentence lengths, and urban stories. In the face of such progress, many remember calls for more relevant content (everyone did not live in cities although the great exodus from farms had begun) and not to forget phonics in the rush to teach reading progressively.

I really wish I knew how pervasive progressivism and its attendant changes became during the '20s and '30s. Our histories don't tell me, and our new histories are very good. Reviewing bound files of magazines helps, but little. Talking to old timers, I am impressed that schooling most places was conducted the best people knew how and that teachers and pupils used materials and resources, as widely as available funds permitted. By and large, however, progressivism seemed to be something happening someplace else, like at Teachers College, Columbia, or in California. Administrative structures and physical plants changed, to be sure. The junior high school movement expanded. Supervision grew. Accreditation drew more schools onto a conforming minimum. Indoor plumbing became more common. Such events were progressive in the same sense as good roads were built. And,

yet, many children and youth stood in fields and tenements as the yellow bus drove by.

Progressivism—as we know it from Counts' stirring PEA speech and Rugg and Shoemaker's *The Child Centered School*—apparently never captured the practices of most school life. Theoretical fine points of teachers leading the construction of a new social order were ignored by flesh-and-blood teachers who struggled to keep positions which were available and who hoped they would not have to continue discounting their monthly vouchers. Schools probably were not child centered, but accounts abound of compassionate, humane teachers who toiled that pupils might learn.

Life in schools changes, however slowly and haltingly. But not all of life, only some of it. Parents went to schools then, as now, and were happy to recognize the familiar and true and faithful, even while applauding or criticizing some of the changes.

Remember separate entrances for boys and girls? When boys first became members of the high school choir? And the year schooling became a twelve year rather than just an eleven year affair? When the band never had girl members? And the girls' basketball team had a better record than the boys' team? Not many people do remember, now, but such revolutionary changes did occur.

Assemblies were commonplace features of the schedule. Sometimes, the event was a regular, the month's circuit appearing ventriloquist, pianist, magician, world traveler. Sometimes, the assembly was very special, letter sweater awards, presentation of perfect attendance or reading circle certificates, rehearsals of contest declamations and debates, a talk from the local boy grown into man visiting from Nome, Alaska. Always, singing, and singing while standing. And with gusto. Announcements, no intercoms then. And in schools with a higher tax base, or better collected taxes, assemblies featuring motion pictures and costumed pageants. Assemblies brought together everyone—pupils, teachers, janitors (no "custodians," then), some parents, and the principal.

Hot lunches began to be served in schools. Some city schools even served juice or milk to the youngest pupils in the morning.

I remember the first hot lunch at our school—and the weeks preparing for it. I think the school received surplus commodities

from the federal government, dried milk, eggs, potatoes, flour, bacon, beans. And the food was cooked and served at school! Some of my classmates who had seldom brought anything for lunch except, maybe, a stone cold biscuit, now ate a full meal. And all of us ate hot lunches. In subsequent years, I remember the "treat" of taking to school a sandwich for lunch, a real change.

Slogans abounded in school. "Hitch your wagon to a star" was in one of my rooms all one year. "Drink milk." "Americans All." And "Wash your hands after going to the restroom and before eating." That slogan I recall well. It was proclaimed across my classroom one year when we had no indoor plumbing and no running water. But slogans are important.

And so is patriotism and its rituals. November 11 at 11 a.m. was special. Old doughboys came to assembly that day. Special music. Perhaps a play. Inevitably, "In Flanders Field the poppies grow. . . ." And every room had a flag and we could not begin our lessons before saying the Pledge of Allegiance.

War made life in schools different.

Classwork halted over the entire nation to listen to President Roosevelt's address to the Congress on December 8, 1941. My teacher brought her radio to school so we all could hear the President. A teacher shortage erupted overnight. Two of my teachers joined the army early; one woman left teaching for wartime work in a shipyard. One year, the high school Spanish teacher was the local Methodist preacher; the over-draft-age druggist taught chemistry; several mothers—including my own—were lured back to the classroom. School was dismissed for registration for food ration stamps; teachers were the registrars. Classes competed for recognition in scrap iron drives, scrap paper drives, savings stamp purchases. Girls knitted scarves for the Junior Red Cross. First aid courses, air raid drills (wartime substitute for fire drills), victory gardens, essay contests, aircraft recognition. And there were curriculum casualties, too. Courses were cancelled because of no teachers or no equipment. Gasoline rationing bit deeply into interscholastic competitions, athletic and academic. And we studied foreign languages and science and mathematics—everything—in some measure as our contribution to Allied victory.

The FSA photographs in this album do not tell a story. They illuminate an age.

Notice the faces of the school children and youth. Happy, seldom hopeless. Interested, carefree, not distraught. The faces of poor children, of youth with almost no realistic expectation of productive jobs.

And look at the times. Grinding. Empty. Threadbare. Dollar-a-day wages. Dust bowl farms.

In those days, under such conditions boys and girls still went to school. Some had no books. Some wore the only clothes they owned. Some were warm at school for the only time of their day. They read. They recited multiplication tables and computed the number of square feet of lumber in the side of a house. They push-pulled and ovalled through penmanship. They enacted Columbus' discovery of the new world. But many had no workbooks and little paper. Parents had no money for a second pencil or Chief tablet. And no money for a school picture, the best photograph of a beautiful girl, but no money.

Older brothers and sisters read Shakespeare and about Ramses and Hannibal and probably did not discuss Mussolini's rout of Haile Selaissie's spear carriers, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, or hobnailed, midnight purges of Jews in the Reich that would endure for a million years. Vocational agriculture boys learned how to terrace farmland, plant new grasses, and construct improved feeders.

We look at the photographs in this album and recognize we have been here before. We have seen these sights. We have known that child. We did that in school. Were the clothes or the color of skin different, that picture could have been taken today at any school, at McKinley Elementary or Murchison Middle School or Parkersburg High School.

Memories in this album are shared by our recognition of events and persons and times. Some we never knew. The album's photographs unlock periods remembered by so very few living Americans. Yet, those times must be ours, too, and our pupils'. We must not lose our past. We must know well who we are as a people and a profession.

Life in schools proceeds with steady pulse. Title programs. Alphabet curricula. Boosterism touting innovation. "Back to the basics" and "Accountability." Schools have known such coun-

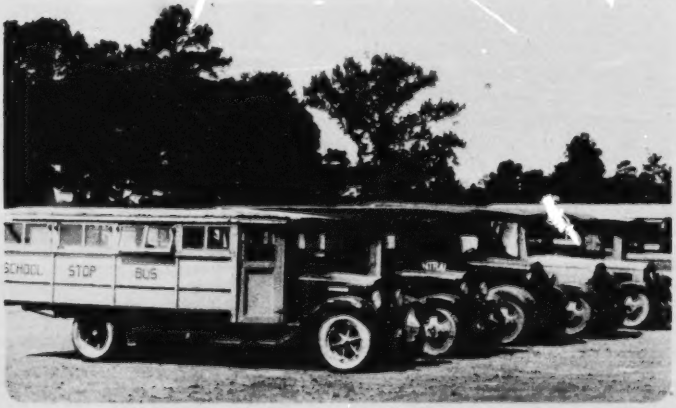
terpoint before. Continuing strong and clear, over generations of teachers in schools (in our family now the third), life in schools features adults and children and youth at work, at rest, intense, playful, optimistic, at loose ends, joyful, sad, engaged in learning, avoiding or postponing learning. Overall, that life is remembered as learning—about our world and ourselves.

Faith in education has more often flowed than ebbed in our national life. We have always expected of the schools more than reasonably could be yielded and berated ourselves for not expecting more.

No hollow faith here. No empty tradition. Rather, life in schools is the embodiment of ideals and sentiments shared however uneasily by millions of individuals. Some of us believe that the public schools have kept America free. While this claim may be extravagant, surely schools have helped us keep the American dreams.

The invitation now is to get inside this album's photographs. To see freshly. To sense acutely. To breathe life into words and images of mind incompletely formed. To recognize your own memories of schooling past and present. To join in sharing your life in school with these photographs and words. To add your special, personal living in schools to the common store.

So, turn the page. And begin to find yourself and your heritage.




*In between bus routes, Wells, Texas, 1939, Lee.*



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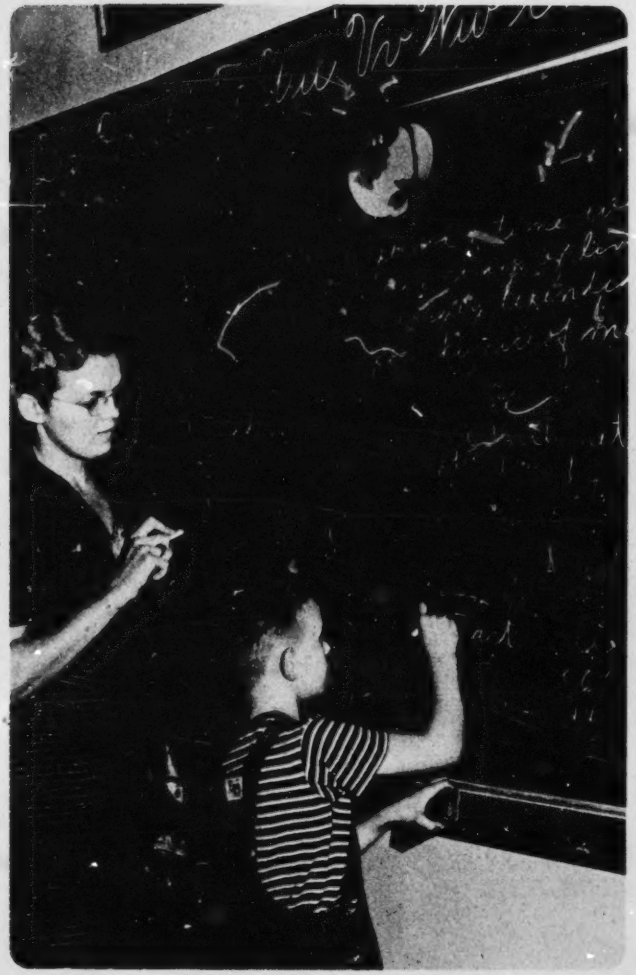
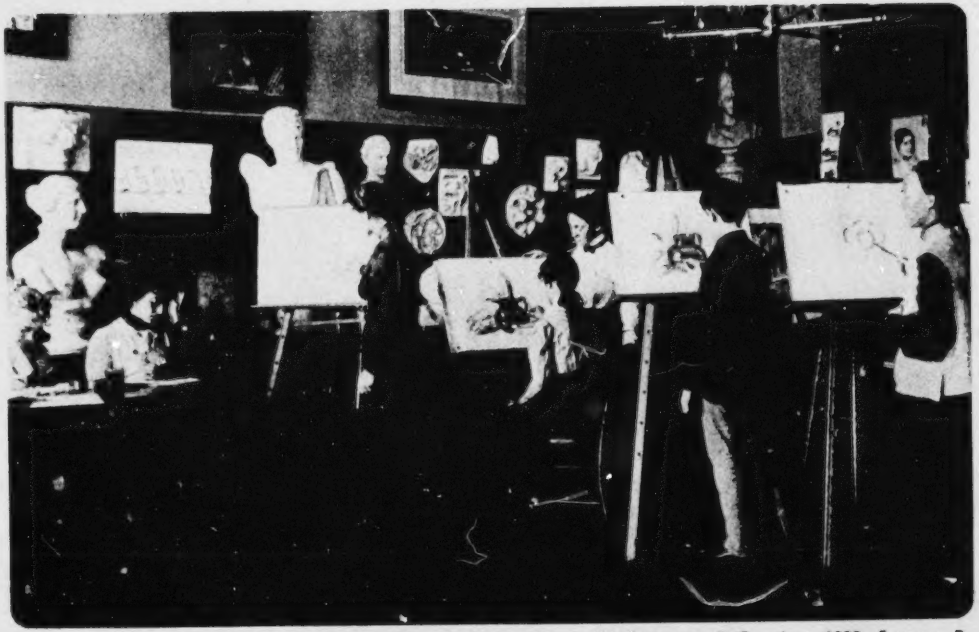


*Second-grader working at the blackboard, Grundy County, Iowa, schools, 1939, Arthur Rothstein.*

19 *Commercial studies, Business High School, Washington, D.C., circa 1899, Frances B. Johnston. Note the simulation of actual business space and practices.*



*Art class at work on detailed sketching, Central High School, Washington, D.C., circa 1899, Frances B. Johnston.*

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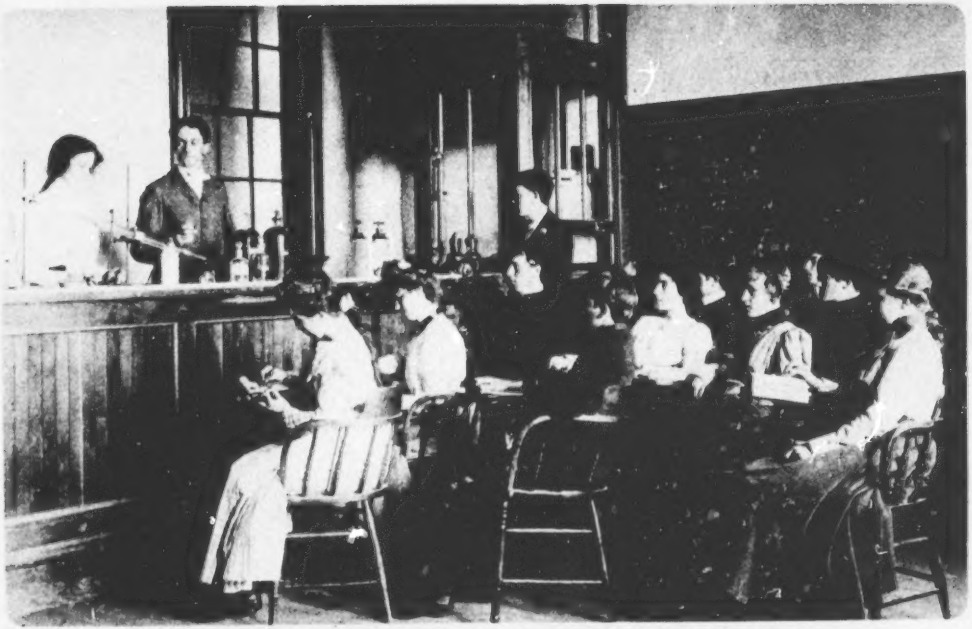
*Washington, D.C., elementary school pupils visit the Smithsonian Institution on a field trip, circa 1899, Frances B. Johnston.*

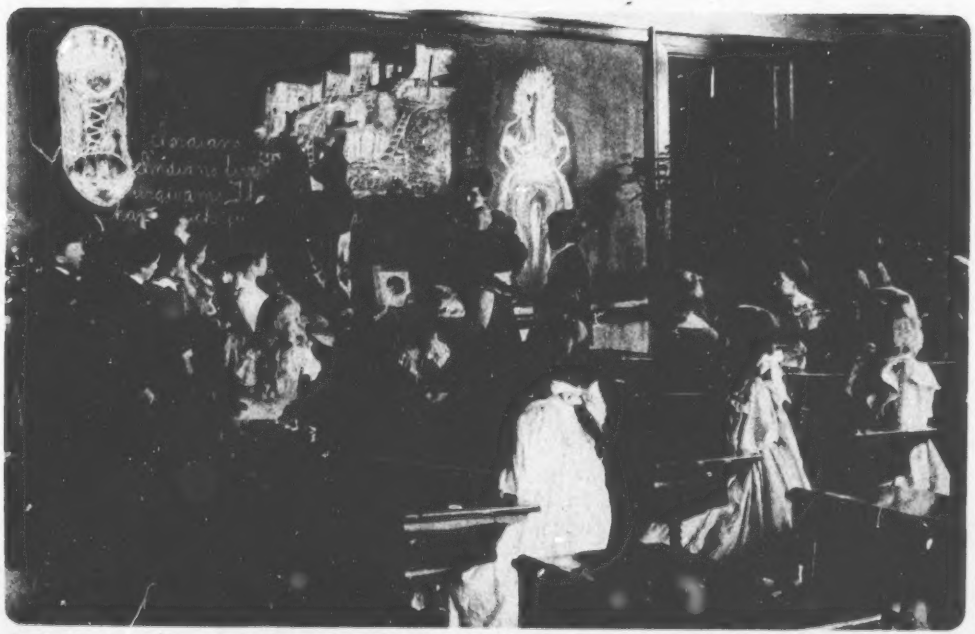
*Working on practical mathematics problems in a park away from their elementary school, Washington, D.C., circa 1899, Frances B. Johnston.*

*A cooking class for black girls, Washington, D.C., schools, circa 1899, Frances B. Johnston.*



*Chemistry class, Western High School, Washington, D.C., circa 1899, Frances B. Johnston.*

*Studying physiology (note the use of a real heart in the demonstrations), Washington, D.C., elementary school, circa 1899, Frances B. Johnston.*



*Studying about American Indian culture in elementary school, Washington, D.C., circa 1899, Frances B. Johnston.*

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*Basketball practice, Western High School, Washington, D.C., circa 1899, Frances B. Johnston.*

*Class at Carlisle Indian School, Pennsylvania, circa 1900, Frances B. Johnston.*

*May Day festivities in the park, New York City, 1913, George Bain.*

*Domestic science class, Emerson School, Gary, Indiana, circa 1910.*

31 *Elementary school pupils used slates and had chairs, not desks, in this east side New York city school, circa 1890.*

*New York city school children planting small garden plots, circa 1910, George Bain.*

*Boys at night school in the Seventh Avenue Children's Aid Society, circa 1890, Jacob Riis.*

*Recess at Malheur County, Oregon, school, 1939, Dorothea Lange.*

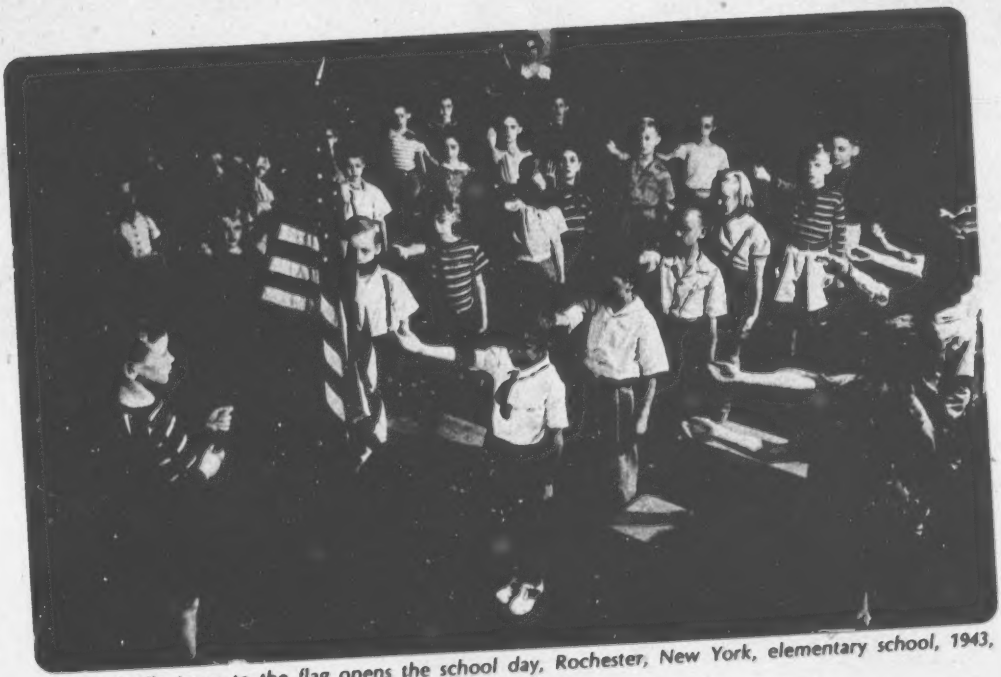
*Waiting for the school bus, Malheur County, Oregon, 1939, Dorothea Lange.*

*First grade reading group, Greenhills, Ohio, 1938, John Vachon.*

37 *Rural children sit together in large desks as they study arithmetic, Breathitt County, Kentucky, 1940, Post-Wolcott.*

*Rhythm band playing under pupil conductor, Chicago, Illinois, school, 1942, Delano.*

Hot lunch cost 5¢ in this Greene County, Georgia, school, 1941, Delano.



*Pledge of Allegiance to the flag opens the school day, Rochester, New York, elementary school, 1943, R. Andursky.*

41 *Two boys work their arithmetic problems from the same textbook, Creek County, Oklahoma, 1940, Lee.*

*Elementary school children learn about prices and money, Washington, D.C., circa 1940, Smith.*

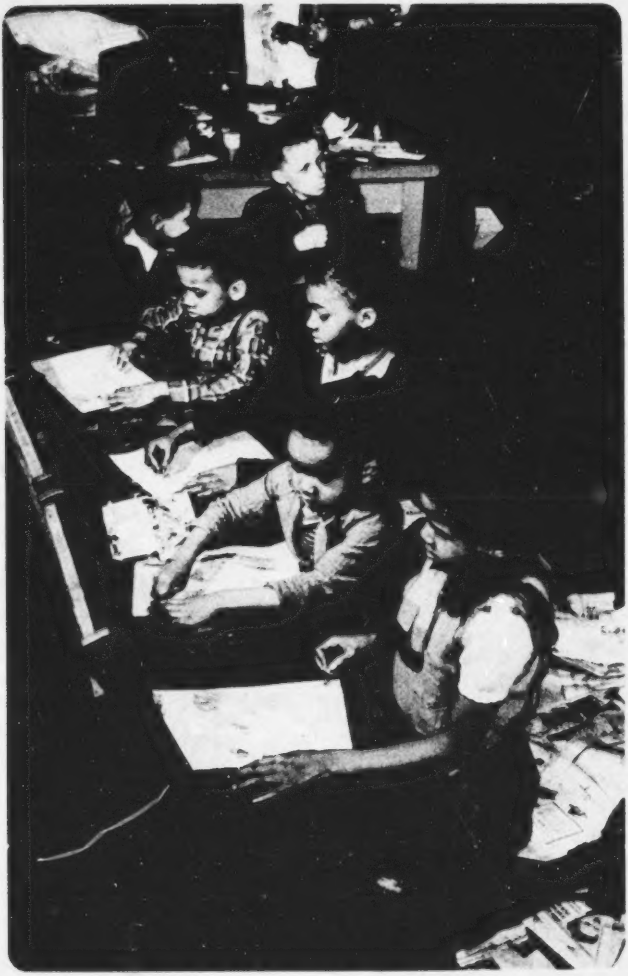
43

*Scrap lumber partition separates older pupils from younger pupils in Ozo Sorco, New Mexico, school, 1943, Collier.*

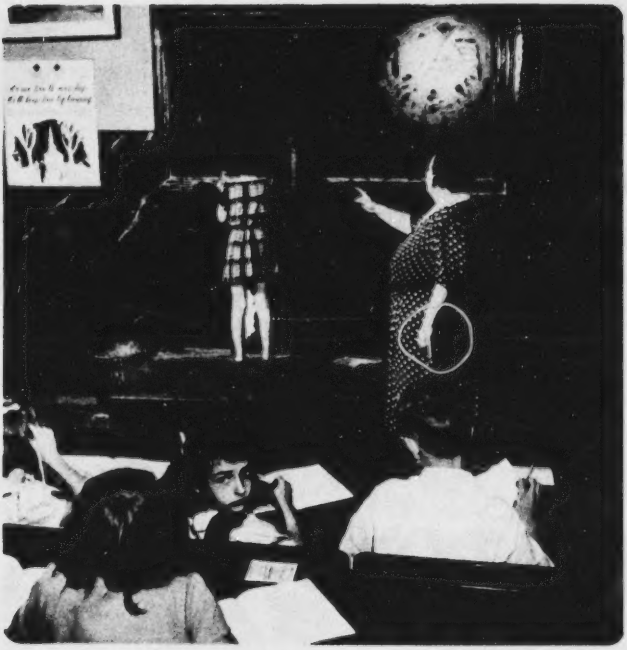
*Building a model of New Amsterdam, Lincoln School, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1942, Collins.*

*Schoolchildren in White Plains, Georgia, 1941, Delano.*

*Lunchtime from a lard bucket, rural school, circa 1935.*



*Children working in art, Chicago, Illinois, school, 1941, Lee.*



*Bilingual education in Czech, New York city, 1942, Collins.*

*Washing up at Nursery school, Buffalo, New York, 1943, Collins.*

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*Getting ready to ride the school bus home after school, Hightstown, New Jersey, 1936, Arthur Rothstein.*

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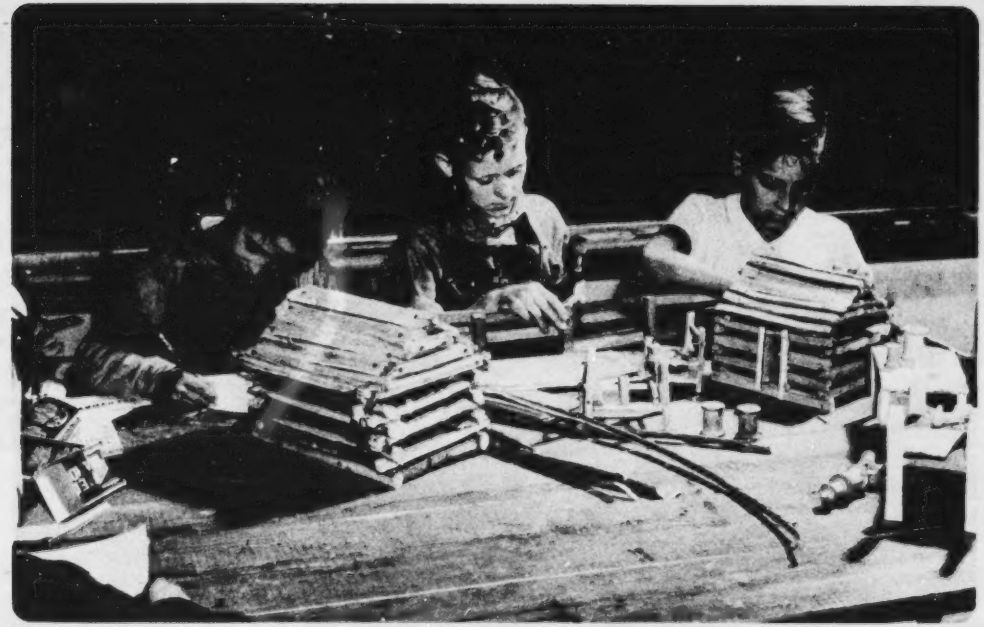

*Constructing a model of a frontier settlement, Big Rock School, Breathitt County, Kentucky, 1940, Post-Wolcott.*